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Strengthening of the coordination of humanitarian and disaster relief assistance of the United Nations, including special economic assistance

Participation of volunteers, "White Helmets", in the activities of the United Nations in the field of humanitarian relief, rehabilitation and technical cooperation for development

Report of the Secretary-General**

I. Introduction

1. The General Assembly, in its resolutions 49/139 B of 20 December 1994, 50/19 of 28 November 1995, 52/171 of 16 December 1997 and 54/98 of 8 December 1999, called on the United Nations Volunteers, a programme administered by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, together with the entire United Nations system, to encourage the use of the expertise available through the White Helmets Initiative. That initiative was established by the Government of Argentina with the aim of promoting the concept of pre-identified, standby and trained teams of volunteers from various national volunteer corps that can be placed at the disposal of the Secretary-General in support of immediate relief, rehabilitation, reconstruction and development activities.

2. The present report covers the period from July 1999 to July 2001. It provides an overview of further progress made in collaboration with different partners, in particular with the Government of Argentina, through the White Helmets Commission of Argentina.

3. The report describes highlights of programme activities and their results, existing mechanisms and partnerships, financing and resource mobilization and underscores opportunities for widening the operationalization of the concept. The joint initiative and the consequent United Nations Volunteers and White Helmets programme were highly appreciated by many parties. Recipients, United Nations country offices and the many individuals and organizations consulted considered the programme relevant as a mechanism in support of humanitarian activities.

4. Within the framework envisaged in the General Assembly resolutions, the Government of Argentina, through the White Helmets Commission, continued actively to support the expansion of the programme in collaboration with the United Nations Volunteers. The United Nations Volunteers and White Helmets Commission partnership is an example of how the White Helmets concept and modality can be applied successfully. While most activities were carried out through their partnership, other countries have

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** The present report is being submitted on 21 August 2001 so as to include as much updated information as possible.

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designated focal points through which a widening of the initiative can be explored and pursued.

II. Highlights of programme activities

5. The following activities, among others, were undertaken in the context of the United Nations Volunteers and White Helmets Commission partnership since the most recent report to the General Assembly at its fifty-fourth session in 1999:

(a) The White Helmets Commission was appointed focal point for the International Year of Volunteers, 2001, and has actively participated in the promotion and celebration of the Year. Having first emerged as a concept within the United Nations system in 1996, the International Year of Volunteers, 2001, was adopted on 20 November 1997 by the Assembly at its fifty-second session in resolution 52/17 as a way of promoting the valuable concept of volunteerism. Its four objectives are increased recognition, increased facilitation, networking and promotion. The concept includes local and national volunteer efforts, as well as bilateral and international programmes, which operate across borders. The underlying premise is that voluntary service is required more than ever to tackle areas of priority concern in the social, economic, cultural, humanitarian and peace-building fields and that more people are needed to offer their services as volunteers;

(b) In response to an appeal by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and at the request of the World Food Programme within the context of the floods affecting Mozambique in March 2000, the White Helmets Commission selected volunteers to serve as food distribution monitors and to provide social welfare support to displaced persons at evacuation centres;

(c) The White Helmets Commission has established rapid response teams, to be fielded within 72 hours of an emergency. A joint exercise of the United Nations Volunteers and White Helmets Commission was undertaken in April 2000, where a team of experts was identified and pre-selected to form the nucleus of the rapid response team;

(d) Taking into account an appeal issued by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in response to the situation created by the earthquakes that struck El Salvador in early 2001, and in accordance with the White Helmets Initiative and United Nations Volunteers rapid response to humanitarian emergencies project, a team was fielded in San Salvador in less than 72 hours. It worked with local authorities and United Nations system agencies in the identification of immediate emergency and reconstruction needs required by the Government for planning purposes. In coordination with the United Nations Children's Fund, a United Nations Volunteers and White Helmets team of architects was sent to El Salvador to help in the reconstruction of local school buildings;

(e) In response to an appeal through the United Nations Volunteers from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the World Food Programme, White Helmets identified and fielded a team of volunteers to provide support activities in refugee camps in Albania and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia;

(f) The Governments of France and Argentina agreed to implement the third phase of a community development and drinking water project, aimed at supporting a non-governmental organization with potable water activities in southeastern Haiti. The activities consist of water system maintenance and sanitary education in water-related diseases;

(g) Three municipalities in the occupied Palestinian territory requested the implementation of a White Helmets regional project in urban planning and geographic information systems along the lines of earlier activities in the Gaza Strip. This project was executed in cooperation with a Federation of Canadian Municipalities project and had the financial support of Argentina and Finland;

(h) A programme for controlling and eradicating brucellosis in the Gaza Strip was launched in mid-February 1998 in collaboration with the National Institute of Agricultural and Livestock Technology of Argentina and the World Health Organization under the coordination of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Jerusalem;

(i) Within the framework of a UNDP ongoing project, a White Helmets project was launched with the objective of supporting the municipalities in the area of Bethlehem in their efforts to improve infrastructure, use of public spaces and special projects designed to

cope with the expected influx of tourists for the millennium celebrations;

(j) During a meeting of the Common Market of the Southern Cone (MERCOSUR), held in Buenos Aires in June 2000, it was agreed that regional humanitarian aid actions should be strengthened and properly coordinated. It is to this end that White Helmets are currently working on an action plan that would include MERCOSUR member States Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay and associated partners Bolivia and Chile;

(k) In view of the success of the White Helmets sports project in Lebanon, implemented in cooperation with Blue Helmets assigned to the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon, United Nations Volunteers and White Helmets initiated, in March 2001, a programme with the United Nations Mission in Kosovo to support sports development in Kosovo, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The United Nations Volunteers and White Helmets help to develop programmes for training, coaching and social sports activities;

(l) In coordination with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, a volunteer with the United Nations Volunteers and White Helmets is collaborating during 2001 with the local office in Ecuador in assisting displaced persons from Colombia;

(m) At the request of the United Nations Volunteers, two White Helmets volunteers were sent to Guyana as observers during the national elections held in March 2001;

(n) Hosted by the Government of Venezuela and in the framework of a UNDP project, a White Helmets Initiative Seminar was held in Caracas in May 2001 with the participation of representatives of Government offices, non-governmental organizations and United Nations system agencies;

(o) As a consequence of the devastating earthquake that hit Gujarat province in India in early 2001 and at the request of the Government of India, the White Helmets Commission has identified three earthquake specialists to develop a prevention-based programme.

6. Assistance to countries provided by the White Helmets directly, outside the partnership with the United Nations Volunteers and the United Nations system, has also demonstrated the potential success of fielding pre-identified, standby and trained teams of volunteers:

(a) In December 1999, as a result of the devastating floods that affected Venezuela and at the request of the Government, the White Helmets Commission sent a volunteer team specialized in emergency supply management systems to install software and train the Red Cross personnel of Venezuela in the use of hardware. Medical assistance was also given;

(b) Upon request by the local authorities, three volunteer experts in emergency supply management systems were sent to El Salvador to help in the installation of software and the training of local personnel in its use;

(c) Within the framework of a humanitarian demining programme, four White Helmets international supervisors have been involved in demining activities in Costa Rica, Honduras and Nicaragua since January 1999;

(d) In 1999, on the recommendation of a reconnaissance mission that included the delivery of humanitarian assistance for the emergency caused by Hurricane Mitch, a White Helmets and Organization of American States mission was carried out in Nicaragua for the agricultural and cattle-breeding sector with the objective of diagnosing the impact of the disaster on small-scale cattle breeders with a view to restoring and improving, where possible, the production capacity affected by Hurricane Mitch;

(e) In response to the needs identified by the initial mission following Hurricane Mitch, a health education programme financed by the White Helmets Initiative and the Organization of American States special fund was launched in February 1999 in Jinotega, Nicaragua, with the objective of achieving public awareness among the largely indigenous population of the importance of hygiene maintenance and safe water usage;

(f) A second project within this framework was carried out jointly with the Pan American Development Foundation and was financed by the White Helmets Initiative and the Organization of American States special fund. A preparatory mission was sent to identify the necessary equipment for two Honduran hospitals severely damaged by Hurricane Mitch. The provision of qualified support for the reinstallation and

specific equipping of both medical centres also included local staff training to ensure the appropriate use and maintenance of the equipment delivered in each case;

(g) Following the earthquake that affected southern Peru in June 2001, four White Helmets volunteers were fielded to assist with emergency supply management, provide psychological support to the victims and assist with the assessment of structural damages.

III. Existing mechanisms and partnerships

7. All United Nations Volunteers and White Helmets Commission activities continued to be implemented within the framework of humanitarian assistance and development programmes of the United Nations agencies, directly responding to requests from host Governments or to appeals by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

8. During the reporting period, activities were undertaken in collaboration with such United Nations agencies as the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Office for Project Services, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the World Food Programme, United Nations peacekeeping operations and national institutions in the beneficiary countries. During joint venture missions in Angola, Haiti and the occupied Palestinian territory, White Helmets had the financial and technical support of the Governments of France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Japan, Spain and the United States of America.

9. The United Nations Volunteers and White Helmets Commission programme cooperation review of 1999 took note of the experience gained with the operationalization of the White Helmets concept and indicated that the concept could be translated into a valuable assistance modality. There is therefore scope to build further on the potential and to expand partnerships with other national volunteer corps, civil society, regional organizations and multilateral funding institutions.

10. Owing to the success of the recent joint missions in El Salvador, a White Helmets Initiative, United Nations Volunteers and United Nations Children's Fund standby agreement is currently being studied for future collaboration.

IV. Financing and resource mobilization

11. The General Assembly in its resolution 49/139 B endorsed the establishment of a special financing window as part of the Special Voluntary Fund of the United Nations Volunteers.

12. The Government of Argentina continues to be the primary contributor to the United Nations Volunteers special financing window. However, a number of other countries have expressed interest in supporting activities through cash or in-kind contributions.

13. On 1 July 1999, a Regional Technical Cooperation agreement was signed between the Organization of American States and the Inter-American Development Bank. Within the agreement framework, the Inter-American Development Bank resolved to make a non-reimbursable contribution of US$ 750,000, or its equivalent in any convertible currency, for the execution of White Helmets volunteers operations within the continent. This is an important first step that will facilitate the integration of a fund, administrated by the Organization of American States, to finance humanitarian actions through the White Helmets Initiative.

14. Other potential sources of additional financing continue to be explored. Examples are the Arab Gulf Programme for the United Nations Development Organizations. The necessary documentation was exchanged with the Programme in order to reach an agreement to finance White Helmets operations in places and activities of mutual interest.

V. Concluding observations

15. Findings from the 1999 joint programme cooperation review conducted by the United Nations Volunteers and the White Helmets Commission indicate that an increasing number of Member States are willing to consider creating and strengthening their volunteer capacities in support of the White Helmets Initiative. The concept of pre-identified, standby and trained teams of volunteers is seen as a modality that can be made available to the United Nations Volunteers

programme in support of immediate relief, rehabilitation, reconstruction and development activities.

16. Taking into account General Assembly resolution 54/98, the Government of Argentina ratified its support to the White Helmets Initiative and designated a new president and board members for the Commission, who jointly with the United Nations Volunteers have developed White Helmets missions since 2000.

17. In order for the United Nations Volunteers, the White Helmets Commission and other participating Governments to build further upon the aforementioned successes and enable replication of these experiences in other Member States, it is hoped that additional financial contributions to the special financial window of the United Nations Volunteers can be mobilized.